

LAOS

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C.I.A. ROLE IN LAOS: ADVISING AN ARMY

150 U.S. Agents Help Direct Secret Guerrilla Forces

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—A month after the enemy attack on the American compound at the northern Laotian military headquarters at Long Tieng, the station chief, case officers and other officials of the American Central Intelligence Agency continue to perform their functions there and at other regional headquarters in Laos.

Though it conducts only ordinary intelligence activities elsewhere, the C.I.A. in Laos takes an active part in managing an army at war. This came about because the 1962 Geneva agreement on the neutrality of Laos barring foreign countries from playing a military role led the United States to turn over its assistance to the agency with the greatest experience in undercover activities.

The army functions separate from the Royal Laotian army, which is equally dependent on American logistic support and is equally financed by the United States, but is commanded by the general staff in Vientiane. The clandestine army is composed largely of mountain tribesmen. Its most active element are of the Meo tribe and its dominant figure is Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, who is also the principal leader of the Meo nation and the commander of the Military Region II of the Royal Laotian army.

Between 150 and 175 C.I.A. agents stationed in Laos are believed to be engaged in helping the guerrilla army. They are augmented by agents who commute from Udon and other bases in neighboring Thailand.

Their work is coordinated by the station chief. He and his local staff occupy the entire second floor of the two-story United States Embassy. The station chief at Udon is reported to occupy an important but subordinate command function in C.I.A. operations in Laos that is said to lead to occasional duplication and confusion in the chain of command. For operations involving the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the station chief in Saigon is said to have primary responsibility.

Professionals Preferred

For its work with the Laotian clandestine army, which Americans prefer to call by its official designation—the strategic guerrilla units—the intelligence agency has engaged under two-year renewable contracts a number of former professional soldiers—showing a preference for men of the Special Forces, or Green Berets, and marines—in addition to men whose careers have been with the C.I.A. Their average age is around 30.

Their principal operating bases are Long Tieng, Savannakhet in the center of the southern panhandle and Pakse near the southern tip. Long Tieng is the most active station, because General Vang Pao's guerrilla units, which are the largest, are stationed there, although since the Feb. 14 attack most are spending their nights in Vientiane. Long Tieng has its own station chief. He reports to the Vientiane chief, who figures on the diplomatic list as a special assistant to the ambassador.

The bulk of the agents are case officers, each entrusted with shepherding a combat position or unit of General Vang Pao's troops, whose present strength is estimated at more than 10,000.

Case officers visit "their" units daily, to check on their disposition and their needs. They fly out of Long Tieng in helicopters or STOL—short take-off and landing—planes operated under contract with the intelligence agency by Air America and the Continental Air Services.

They consult with their units officers, ascertain their needs in arms, ammunition, water and food, supplies, tactical air support and helicopter or plane transport for combat operations. They also help with troop morale matters.

Although the agents carry rifles or sidearms and favor camouflage uniforms, their assignment does not include active participation in combat operations.

In the past, there have been frequent violations, but the rarity of casualties indicates that the rule is widely respected.

While counseling Gen. Vang Pao and his officers, the C.I.A. does not command his army at any level, informed sources say. Laotians who know the Meo general well say that his pride and temper rule out anything more than an advisory role in combat operations combined with total dependence on the United States for all material, transport and pay.

After visiting their units, the case officers return to Long Tieng, where they arrange for the delivery of required supplies, supervise loading of planes or helicopters and submit air support requests to the C.I.A. contractors and the United States Air Force officers also posted at Long Tieng.

Once a week the station chief at Long Tieng submits a report to his superiors in Vientiane and Udon on the disposition of all troops in the clandestine army.

Case officers also work closely with the Air Force forward air controllers who fly out of Long Tieng and direct fighter-bombers to targets in ground support missions.